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SOUTHCOM FOR LT. GEN. SPEARS AND AMBASSADOR TRIVELLI

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/08/2019

TAGS: [ES](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#)

SUBJECT: YOUR VISIT TO EL SALVADOR

Classified By: Charge Blau for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: There have been two major developments since LT. Gen. Spears' last visit to El Salvador: left-wing FMLN candidate Mauricio Funes won the March 15 Presidential election, and the government of El Salvador (GOES), via exchange of diplomatic notes, extended U.S. access to the Comalapa Cooperative Security Location (CSL). Subsequent to Funes' electoral triumph, Embassy San Salvador has devoted considerable effort to laying the groundwork for a productive relationship with the oncoming Funes/FMLN administration. Your visit will serve to help reassure the Salvadoran armed forces (ESAF) of our interest in continuing a close relationship on security cooperation in the Funes era, as well as to sensitize President-elect Funes and his inner-circle to U.S. regional security priorities. End summary.

Political Update

¶2. (C) On March 15, Mauricio Funes and the left-wing FMLN won one of the closest Presidential elections in Salvadoran history. The final tally showed Funes defeating right-wing ARENA party candidate Rodrigo Avila by a mere 60,000 votes, which represents less than three percent of total votes cast.

Although the campaign featured some bitter, divisive rhetoric from both sides, the election itself proceeded largely without significant violence nor any major irregularities. ARENA's Rodrigo Avila graciously conceded defeat when the final result became inevitable, and used his concession speech to call on ARENA supporters and the public at-large to accept the verdict rendered at the voting booths.

¶3. (C) In the aftermath of his electoral victory, Funes has so far publicly and privately expressed a desire to continue cooperating with the U.S. on a wide range of economic, defense, and public security issues. Moreover, Funes-appointed transition teams tasked with handling economic, defense, and public security issues have apparently established good working relations with the outgoing Saca administration, and a relatively smooth transition appears to be in the offing. Funes takes power June 1. Secretary of State Clinton will head the U.S. delegation attending the inauguration. In the meantime, we are closely following the cabinet selection process for indications of whether Funes will fill out his administration with pragmatic centrists, as he has promised he would, or whether hard-line FMLN stalwarts will be able to wrangle key cabinet spots such as Foreign Affairs, Public Security and Justice, and the National Civilian Police Director.

¶4. (C) While tensions have emerged between the Funes team and FMLN since election day focused mainly on key government

and cabinet positions, both sides are still trying to put a positive spin on their relationship and keep disagreements out of the media. Medardo Gonzalez, FMLN Coordinator General and head of the party's legislative delegation, has made supportive noises about the President-elect's prerogative to name government officials, while emphasizing the significant role the Assembly will play during Funes, term. A small group of FMLN supporters staged a rowdy protest in the new Assembly's first session to protest election of a right-wing (PCN) party legislator as Assembly President with support from ARENA, despite the FMLN's plurality. We expect Funes to name his cabinet just before his inauguration in order to minimize similar, probably inevitable recriminations from FMLN activists who may feel they won the election but lost the battle to control the Salvadoran Government. Civil society and business groups have reached out to the Funes team to express cautious optimism that while the tone and direction of El Salvador will veer left during Funes, presidency, the country's institutions will be protected.

15. (C) Funes' contacts with high-level USG officials have to date been positive and non-confrontational. Shortly after the election, Funes received congratulatory phone calls from President Obama and Secretary of State Clinton. He has subsequently met with Vice President Biden in Costa Rica, with President Obama and Secretary Clinton at the Summit of the Americas, and here in El Salvador has received WHA Assistant Secretary Shannon and a Congressional delegation sponsored by the Woodrow Wilson Center.

16. (S) Although we expect to be able to establish a modus vivendi with the Funes administration on most areas of U.S. interest, Embassy efforts to engage Funes on public security have run into a temporary stumbling block: Funes selected Manuel Melgar, a former wartime guerrilla commander, as director of his public security and defense transition team. Melgar was allegedly involved in the planning of the infamous 1985 attack in the Zona Rosa area of San Salvador that resulted in the murder of four Marine Security Guards and several other innocent civilian bystanders. Once the key positions of Minister of Public Security and National Civilian Police Director are filled, we will have a better idea of the shape our future defense and security cooperation with the GOES under Funes will likely take, and proceed accordingly.

Military and Defense Update

17. (C) The most important military development since your last visit to El Salvador is the successful extension of the agreement granting U.S. access to the Comalapa Cooperative Security Location (CSL). On April 2 the GOES presented us with a note accepting the U.S. offer made on July 2, 2008, to extend the CSL agreement for an additional five years, under the same terms and operational parameters currently in place. With the extension in place, the CSL agreement is now valid through August 23, 2015. President-elect Funes has publicly affirmed his support for U.S. counter-narcotics operations out of the Comalapa CSL. In another promising development, Funes has indicated that he is leaning towards appointing a Defense Minister from within the ranks of the uniformed military.

18. (C) Other military issues on the horizon include the upcoming visit of the USNS Comfort, as well as the possibility of El Salvador agreeing to deploy a contingent to Afghanistan. The Comfort port call and associated medical and other humanitarian assistance will provide an excellent opportunity to highlight DOD's humanitarian relief role in the SOUTHCOM AOR, and we anticipate that our public diplomacy outreach will build upon already high-levels of Salvadoran public acceptance of GOES engagement with the U.S. military. In contrast, the possibility of a Salvadoran deployment to Afghanistan, which is apparently viewed favorably within the upper echelons of the ESAF high command, may prove to be outside the comfort zone of President-elect Funes but is

worth at least raising with him.

Main Points to Communicate

19. (C) In addition to reassuring the Salvadoran military and defense community of our strong interest in continuing a close, collaborative relationship on defense issues, your visit is a good opportunity to sensitize President-elect Funes and his inner circle to U.S. regional security priorities. Thanking Funes for his public statements in support of the U.S. presence at the Comalapa CSL can serve as a springboard for emphasizing the importance the U.S. places on countering the corrosive effects of narcotics trafficking, money laundering, arms smuggling, and transnational crime, as well as the necessity of his administration remaining vigilant on counter-terrorism and terrorist financing. A discussion of our interest in continued military-to-military cooperation with the ESAF, with emphasis on the institutional and material benefits the ESAF stands to gain from maintaining the relationship, will highlight the advantages of continued close cooperation with the USG.

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